

Spellings backs ideas to simplify college choices

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Handed a plan to shake up college life in America, Education Secretary Margaret Spellings is endorsing some of its key ideas and promising to get moving on them.

Her overarching theme is to make everything about college – choosing one, affording one, succeeding in one – easier for families. Parents should be able to shop for a college as simply as they shop for a car, she said, with a clear expectation of what they will get.

But higher education in the United States is a diverse field, and finding the will and the money for the agenda may prove difficult.

High on her list is the creation of a massive information system -- a way to judge how colleges and universities are doing in helping students succeed. It would require a vast collection of data on students, with a promise that their privacy will be protected.

The Education Department would work with states and colleges to make that happen, Spellings said Monday, commenting for the first time on a national commission's ideas.

The department would then use the data to overhaul its college Web site. The idea is for people to compare one school to another, right down to the typical salaries of graduates.

She also pledged to make applying for financial aid easier and speedier.

"Some of this stuff is so commonsensical, and the urgency is so great," Spellings told The Associated Press. "We need to get going on this."

Spellings outlined her plans ahead of a Tuesday speech at the National Press Club. The Bush administration is getting more aggressive on college issues, a popular area for voters.

Spellings would not commit to one of her advisory panel's most specific ideas: increasing Pell Grants to cover at least 70 percent of in-state tuition costs. Pell Grants, the main form of federal aid for low-income students, now cover less than half the costs.

The idea would cost billions of dollars, either in new spending or cuts elsewhere.

Spellings said she supports more financial aid for poor families. But she would not get specific, wary of pre-empting President Bush before his next budget plan is released.

Ultimately, Spellings said she embraced recommendations that she can do something about. She said she will work with Congress and states on the others.

One, for example, called for a total restructuring of financial aid. It would mean consolidating dozens of programs that the commission found to be confusing and inefficient.

“I’m for it,” Spellings said. “But obviously I understand that Congress needs to weigh in.”

Spellings said she also wants to:

- Provide matching federal money to states, colleges and universities that report how well their students are performing. The money will be offered as an incentive for candor.
- Call together groups that accredit universities and try to change the standards upon which schools are judged. The goal would be to put more emphasis on student performance.
- Align high school standards with college work, another commission recommendation. But Spellings wants to do this by extending the No Child Left Behind law into high schools. The Bush administration has been proposing that for two years with little interest from Congress.

Spellings didn’t touch other recommendations, based on her prepared comments.

There was no mention of reforming student visa rules for foreign students. Or of leading a national strategy to make learning easier for nontraditional students, especially adults.

The commission, led by investor Charles Miller, called the U.S. higher education system one of the nation’s biggest successes. But it also called it complacent and overly expensive, with little accountable for its students and poor access for minority students.

Spellings walked that line, too. She called higher education here the envy of the world, but then said the nation has turned into a leader, not a follower, in education competition.

Miller said he thinks Spellings has responded fairly to his group’s recommendations.

“People tend to think you can run over to the Capitol and everyone there gets to decide,” Miller said. “We have a national system, but it’s not a federal system. She’s got the right balance on that. She needs to get help from a lot of others. I think she’ll engage them.”

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